

Method and Metaphysics: Essays in Ancient Philosophy I, by Jonathan Barnes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xi+621. H/b £62.50.

This volume collects several invaluable essays not only for the specialist or the interested in Ancient philosophy or the history of philosophy. It is also a source of exegetical and conceptual riches in the form of rigorous discussions of crucial philosophical problems, theses, and arguments. Even the papers which are reviews of other theorists' works are characterised not only by astute critical spirit but also by a wealth of positive proposals.

The collection displays a reasonable level of thematic unity. Method occupies a considerable part. Barnes clarifies that this notion is said in more than one way. First, there are six essays focusing on the question of how to study (the history of) Ancient philosophy, or generally the history of philosophy:

'Philosophy has no history: the great philosophers of the past are still living –they live in their works, and they are contemporary with every age. "Why bother to read Aristotle" ask the sceptics; "he has been dead for twenty-three hundred years". He is not dead. He is alive and well –and he still argues with his colleagues and friends in Oxford and in Louvain.' (p. 55).

This is an attitude with which many of us, who are philosophically formed in the Analytic tradition, are familiar. It is also a method of approaching the work of past philosophers which bears rich philosophical fruit (provided that it escapes the snares of anachronism). Barnes deploys this strategy in a masterful fashion. The second type of concern with method addresses Aristotle's conception (or lack of conception –this last view is more congenial to Barnes' position) of philosophical method. This topic is the focus of three essays, and will be discussed briefly in what follows.

There are three main reasons why it is not easy to raise decisive objections to, or even exercise acute criticism of, Barnes' philosophical work. First, one frequently finds oneself in agreement with the author about several claims and arguments. Second, even in the face of initial disagreement, the cogency of argumentation, the lucidity of the claims, and the precision of the formulations render Barnes' essays compelling. Third, because some of the essays are reviews of other authors' works, or commentaries on commentaries written by ancient or modern authors on some earlier philosopher's work, the prospective critic is inevitably placed under (or over) a significant number of levels and meta-levels of discussion. Let me, however, focus on just three points which could be challenged, or at least about which difficulties could be raised. All these points seem to flow from a common problematic attitude: the less than flexible way in which we tend to approach terms or concepts used by certain philosophers (past or present). This attitude results from our supposing that a term or concept is more rigid or uniform than it has to be, or that it is undermined by certain assumptions or (apparently unbreakable) dilemmas. None of the following points is equivalent to a charge of crude anachronism.

The first point is about Barnes' view of Aristotle's philosophical method. Drawing on Gilbert Ryle's comparison of questions about method with a runner's thinking about his or her feet, Barnes formulates vividly his position:

'From time to time, Aristotle thought about his feet; and he produced one or two odd theories of running. But, like any good athlete, he forgot about theorising when it came to the race' (p. 194).

And elsewhere, in a similar spirit:

'What method does Aristotle employ in his philosophising? –He doesn't employ a method. Why ever should he?' (p. 173)

We could probably agree with an attenuated variant of Barnes' position. But is it true that Aristotle did not (explicitly or intentionally) employ any method at all in his philosophising? Barnes argues against the view that Aristotle's method in his philosophical treatises is a form of 'strong' dialectic. One of the main reasons he offers is that the philosophical treatises do not establish Aristotle's first principles (or anything for that matter) through dialectical syllogisms on the basis of endoxic premisses. But the dialectical method described in the *Topics* involves essentially such syllogisms (see the *sullogizesthai* at I.1, 100a18-20). Hence, Aristotle is not using this (or any similar) method in his philosophical treatises.

Aristotle, however, claims that dialectic is important, *inter alia*, for inquiring into the first principles of the philosophical sciences in a passage where there is no mention of (dialectical or any other sort of) syllogising (101a26-28; a34-b4). Barnes discusses this passage but does not explain why we should suppose that Aristotle's introductory remark about dialectical syllogising also applies to the more exalted task of dialectic in which it examines or attains philosophical first principles. And, even if we hold that the introductory remark about dialectical syllogising somehow governs the rest of book I of the *Topics*, can't 'syllogising' be used more liberally to cover cases of general deduction, or even an inductive, or quasi-inductive, or analogical, or any other sort of looser form of argument? Alternatively, one may think that superficially non-syllogistic arguments, which comprise the vast majority of Aristotle's arguments in the philosophical treatises, could be recast, with conservative modifications, additions, or re-orderings, into syllogistic format. Why, then, draw the strong conclusion that Aristotle has no philosophical method, or that dialectic plays no part in the few places in which he engages with methodological theorising?

The crucial question, then, is whether Aristotle presupposes (at *Topics* I.2, 101b2-4) that the 'path' towards philosophical first principles essentially involves regimented, *Topics*- or *Analytics*-style syllogisms, or not. It is not implausible to suggest that as a method (or

quasi-method) of establishing first principles, dialectic is more flexible in that it need not be syllogistic. The passage under discussion uses the term *eksetastikê*: that which examines, the examining, or the one with the (solidly exercised) power of examining. It also emphasises the importance of raising and thoroughly exploring puzzles (*diaporêsai*) concerning several alternative or opposing philosophical claims (101a34-36). Why not think that this sort of (dialectical) inquiry, as opposed to dialectical syllogising (narrowly construed), is a type of the *eksetasis* essential to achieving a grasp of first principles? Similarly, at *Metaphysics* *Γ*.2, 1004b22-26, in a passage which is taken as alluding to Aristotle's dialectical method of reaching first principles, he uses the term *peirastikê*, which expresses a notion cognate with that of (the power of) examining or *eksetazein*: dialectic is probing, whereas philosophy is knowing (*gnôristikê*). Barnes maintains that this passage does not offer any methodological theses but is simply contrasting the capacity or *dunamis* of the dialectician with that of the philosopher. It would not be unfair, however, to think that a 'power with which we inquire into and attain first principles' can be constructively compared with, and form the basis for, a method towards first principles. To tackle this issue, we would have to examine Aristotle's claim in *Metaphysics* *Γ*.4 that the 'proof' of the Principle of Non-Contradiction is an elenctic (and hence, I presume, dialectical in some sense) proof (1006a5-18), as well as his difficult argument in the *Posterior Analytics* I.11 that dialectic 'communicates' with all the sciences, especially if one were to attempt to establish the common axioms shared by all sciences, such as the Principle of the Excluded Middle (77a26-35).

The second point is not about Aristotle's method but about his view of mathematical entities, and in particular numbers, the subject-matter of arithmetic. Barnes argues convincingly that in Aristotle's view numbers do not form some ontologically special kind: for they exist neither independently of ('over and above') physical objects, nor 'in' them in some special way (this last claim presumably entails that numbers as such do not constitute

physical objects; or that physical entities do not consist of numbers, or of any other mathematical entities for that matter). Rather, Barnes holds, Aristotle takes arithmetic to be studying ordinary objects, such as ‘one man, ten geese, a thousand ships’ (p. 339). One may think, however, that numbers, as well as other mathematical entities, really are special types of entity. A more nuanced thesis, one which avoids not only the Platonist, ‘over and above’ position, and the (Pythagorean?) ‘in’ view, but also Barnes’ own construal of the Aristotelian view would run as follows. Numbers do exist as distinctive mathematical, or arithmetical entities. For, unlike physical objects, their nature does not involve any perceptible matter or any capacity for change. Nor do their definitions mention any such physical items (see, for instance, *Physics* II.2, 193b22-194a12, or *Metaphysics* E.1, 1025b30-1026a6, where the definitions of the curved/curvature and the concave/concavity are sample definitions of mathematical entities). While numbers form this special sort of entity, they do nevertheless necessarily depend on ordinary objects, matter, and changeability for their existence within the physical world. For they cannot exist in the ordinary, perceptible, material, and changeable world unless some physical object or other exists. (The prepositions ‘in’ and ‘within’ used in these formulations do not entail that numbers or mathematical entities make up physical objects.)

Barnes initially puts forward the strong claim that the quantifiers of all scientific propositions (including arithmetical propositions) range over a common domain: ‘the sciences all deal fundamentally with the same world’ (p. 342). While he goes on to characterise this claim as an exaggeration, he insists that Aristotle’s thesis is that all sciences deal with the same world. Even if we can treat ‘arithmetically’ not only physical objects but all sorts of things, it is still the case that our arithmetical practices ‘can be explained wholly by way of sentences which refer only to ordinary physical objects’ (pp. 343-4). Barnes construes Aristotle as somehow reducing arithmetical claims to claims about physical objects

alone (p. 344). It is crucial, however, to ask what Aristotle would take the number of (the types of) existents to be: just the number of physical objects, or the number of physical objects plus the number of arithmetical entities? To the latter possibility Barnes would react by speaking of a ‘nauseatingly rich ontology’ (p. 344). But why should our Quinean presuppositions or prejudices in favour of austerity prevail at this point? In the nuanced Aristotelian position adumbrated in the previous paragraph, arithmetic studies arithmetical items, entities of a distinctive nature, different from physical objects, albeit necessarily dependent upon them. It is not arithmetic itself which studies numbers as necessarily dependent on, as somehow posterior to, and hence as neither ‘over and above’ nor ‘in’, physical objects. Rather, this task is reserved for the philosophy of arithmetic, or (in terms more familiar to Aristotle) for a part of theoretical philosophy, or perhaps even a part of first philosophy (the one studying numbers and mathematical beings, the type of investigation carried out in *Metaphysics MN*).

There is logical space, indeed there is good reason, for thinking that Aristotle’s project is not to catalogue (types of) existing things, or to limit the number of (types of) existents in favour of a deflated, desert-like ontological landscape. Rather, his aim seems to be to investigate what is metaphysically primary or basic, given a fairly permissive (but not promiscuous) view of the number of (the types of) existents. More importantly, he discusses the notion of primacy or fundamentality itself as he recognises that it can be ‘said in many different ways’. One way in which arithmetical entities are fundamental is circumscribed within the domain of arithmetic: for in this domain numbers are essentially independent of perceptible matter, or changeable physical objects. But in another, perhaps more ‘absolutist’ way, the way in which philosophy of arithmetic (or ‘mathematical’ first philosophy) examines its subject-matter, physical objects are more fundamental: for numbers and other mathematical necessarily depend on them for their existence. [Nor does this interpretation

render Aristotle's position relativist or pragmatist: for in it mathematical objects exist (in an unattenuated fashion) as essentially immaterial and unchangeable entities; and, in a similar manner, necessarily physical objects exist if mathematical entities are to exist.]

The third point is not about Aristotle himself but about a *par excellence* Aristotelian philosopher, Alexander of Aphrodisias. In his discussion of Alexander's take on Aristotle's position (here is a good example of the manifold of levels and meta-levels of commentary alluded to earlier) concerning destiny and what is up to us, Barnes notes that in Alexander's view actions are up to us in that they involve rational assent, which functions as a special type of starting-point:

'So, in claiming, after Aristotle, that men are the starting-points of their actions, isn't Alexander claiming that men are uncaused causes of what they do? And isn't that what makes practical reasoning so special?' (p. 385)

In the Aristotelian view, deliberation and choice are the crucial components of practical reasoning. But Barnes points out:

'[...] it is plain that the deliberations and the choices Alexander invokes are mental events. Choosing, and the preparatory deliberating, are things which we do, which take place at a time or which take time to do; and if they are events, then it must be pertinent to wonder why they do not enter into the causal nexus like any other honest event.' (p. 387)

If this is true, however, it seems that our actions are not up to us but are caused deterministically just as any other sort of event. Barnes envisages the possibility that Alexander may be taking deliberating, choosing, and acting as *sui generis*, such that they do not have causes (at least not in the way in which ordinary events do). He thinks that Alexander countenances not only Aristotle's thesis that there are uncaused causes but also the ancient maxim that every happening has a cause:

‘The two positions are compatible insofar as there are plenty of things which are not happenings –and it is among them that any uncaused causes must be sought. [...] After all, men are not happenings, so if men are uncaused causes, it does not follow that something comes about causelessly. But if that is what Alexander has in mind, then it is scarcely helpful; for men are starting-points inasmuch as their deliberations and choices are starting-points –and those items are indeed happenings.’ (pp. 389-90)

(It seems safe to take the notion of a happening in the last quotation as equivalent to that of an event in the passage quoted previously.)

Why assume, however, that deliberating is an event? Indeed, why assume that choice (*prohairesis*), insofar as it involves thinking, is an event? (*Prohairesis* is, after all, desiderative *thought* or *dianoetic* desire; *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2, 1139b4-5. But it is important, at this juncture, to distinguish between the state that choice is and the deployment of this state, which may well be likened to a sort of process or *energeia*. For present purposes, however, the difficult notion of choice can be put to the side.) Aristotle does not seem to be using the notion of an event. It is unclear whether his philosophical arsenal even possesses this notion. Rather, he develops his moral ontology on the basis of the concept of a process (*kinêsis*), perhaps a special sort of process, an activity or *energeia*. While processes or activities continue, unfold, or develop through time, events happen or occur at a time, or take time to happen. Processes seem to continue or move through space, whereas events do not do so. Finally, a process such as *my writing this review* might have failed to reach its end-point; or it could have lasted longer; or it might have been interrupted, inhibited, or interfered with. The corresponding event, by contrast, *my writing of this review* cannot occur unless I succeed in completing it. While processes are continuants which persist through time, events do not seem to share with them crucial temporal, spatial, and modal features. (For a discussion of

these issues see Charles D., ‘Aristotle on Action’, forthcoming in *Oxford Handbooks Online: Aristotle*.)

If deliberations are not events but are processes, or special types of process such as *energeiai*, the difficulty noted by Barnes does not seem to arise. In this alternative view, deliberations would be uncaused or causeless causes in that they are not determined in the way in which events are. Of course, as Barnes himself remarks, there are items which are temporally prior to deliberations; but temporal priority is neither identical with, nor even necessary for, (Aristotelian) causal priority. Even if these temporally prior items were ‘causes’ related to deliberations, they would not be causes of our actions in the relevant sense. If this is correct, deliberations (and choices?) would be proper causes of our actions, and so our actions could still be thought as being up to us. It goes without saying, however, that a lot needs to be said to flesh out the notion of being a cause in the ‘relevant’ or ‘proper’ sense, the sense reserved for deliberations (and choices) but not applying to events. This task would require an account of the precise type of process or *energeia* that deliberation (or generally practical reasoning) is in Aristotle’s view.

Let me conclude by emphasising that none of the points just raised imply that we should somehow shield ‘past masters’ from criticism or objections arising from our modern conceptual framework, or our own problems, or our distinctive formulations of problems shared with them. Rather, the suggestion is that we should not assume that our own presuppositions, or the (apparently) exhaustive or exclusive disjunctions or distinctions with which we operate constitute *aporiai*, as it were, dilemmas on the horns of which past thinkers are doomed to be impaled. Indeed, not having to see our impasses as their own impasses is the invaluable contribution of earlier theorists. They are alive, relevant to, and sprightly participants in the on-going philosophical discussion, for they (or at least some of them) have

the resources with which to undermine these intellectual dilemmas, or to discover ways out of the (apparent) dead-ends.

These are, at any rate, minor pedantries. Barnes' volume of collected papers on method and metaphysics is indispensable: it contains works of scholarly excellence, advances arguments of admirable clarity and cogency, and raises all the crucial questions growing out of the fields it examines. The volume itself is beautifully presented, includes new footnotes with helpful citations of most of the original Greek texts discussed, and retains (in brackets) the pagination of the papers in their original place of publication.

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